The automobile and the motion picture industry are icons of American life. The two

became the perfect match for inventor Richard M. Hollingshead Jr. when he combined

them and opened the first drive-in movie theater in Camden, New Jersey, in the summer of 1933.

Hollingshead somehow knew that this type of movie theater could eventually prove

successful, basing his assumption on the fact that a certain segment of the population never attended indoor movie houses. He felt confident that once his concept became a reality, people would love the idea of watching movies from inside their automobiles, and he was right.

Families were drawn to drive-in movie theaters due in part to their convenience. More

than just a movie was offered to the ticket holder: There was no need to get all dressed up, you didn’t have to hire a babysitter, parking was included in the price of the ticket, and dinner was just a quick walk to the concession stand. Drive-ins also became popular with teenagers because it was the ideal place to take a date or socialize with “the gang.” What could be better than dinner and a movie under the stars?

Toward the latter part of the 1930s, a depressed economy and a world war were just two of the reasons for the somewhat slow development of drive-in movie theaters. All of that would change by the mid-1940s.

After the war, America flourished. With a booming economy, hoards of families flocked

to the suburbs. The setting was perfect for the success of drive-ins. There was plenty of

affordable, available land and the “car culture” in America was just beginning.

The 1950s was the golden age for drive-in movie theaters. More than 4,600 were

opened for business during the prosperous and defining decade of the baby boom. To lure in the family trade, playgrounds were built for children while live bands entertained adults. Never mind that the movies were second-rate as was the sound quality—it was the “drive-in experience” that kept moviegoers coming back for more.

As the decade neared an end, so did the popularity of going to the drive-in. By the

mid-1960s and well into the 1970s, “the drive-in experience” had become somewhat

tiresome. The inferior quality of the movies being shown combined with the antiquated

sound system led many customers back to indoor theaters.

During the 1980s more and more drive-ins began closing down for good. Many owners

jumped at the chance to sell their lots to land developers as a means of getting out of

a sagging business. …

Yet with all its adversity and struggle, the drive-in movie theater has endured. It has

withstood the test of time and has become a symbol for a public that is not quite ready to give up on its nostalgic past.

Today many drive-ins appear to be enjoying a resurgence in popularity. Owners and

operators, taking pride in their establishments, are now offering Dolby sound along with

first-run movie releases. What began as the idea of one man in Camden, New Jersey, has become a cultural icon for over half a century. Drive-in movie theaters have been and always will be part of the American landscape.

—Elizabeth McKeon and Linda Everett

excerpted from *Cinema Under the Stars*, 1998

Cumberland House

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| **WRITING TASK** |
| In the next to the last paragraph, what do the authors mean when they say the drive-in movie theater has become a symbol of a “nostalgic past”? Use specific evidence from the passage to support your explanation. |
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